

ITALIAN VOLUNTEERS OF THE WAFFEN-SS

24.Waffen-Gebirgs-(Karstjaeger) Division der SS

and

29.Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (italienische Nr. 1)



By

Richard Landwehr

Operational Area of the 29th Italian SS Division in Northern Italy, Spring 1945



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Typesetting and Design by

Ray Merriam



Dedication
To all the volunteers of
the Italian Waffen-SS,
living or dead.

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FOREWORD

It is a safe bet to state that the Italian Division of the Waffen-SS was not the most distinguished of the many foreign volunteer units to serve in that multi-national military organization. That is partly due to the fact that the 29th SS Division was never completely formed into a single coherent entity and in fact never left Italy to fight elsewhere. But it is important to state that the Italian Waffen-SS units that did see combat action acquitted themselves nobly and fought with great courage and effectiveness.

The Italian SS troops did actually fight for their homeland and were authentic representatives of the legitimate Italian Fascist government which was overthrown in 1943. Legally therefore, these volunteers had every right to resist what to them was a hostile invasion of Italy by the "Allied" forces. It is fair to say also that the Italian SS men were highly motivated ideologically and held the "Allied" plutocrat-capitalists in equal contempt with the barbarous Communist partisans that terrorized the countryside.

In the end, all of the idealistic motivation came to naught. The Western Powers turned loose their Communist

terrorist allies on the captured soldiers of the Italian Waffen-SS. The result was the mass murder of most of the Italian SS men. There were not many survivors and the story of the Italian Waffen-SS largely vanished, emerging only occasionally in some suitable piece of distorted hate propaganda. This then is the story of the Italian Waffen-SS as best as I have been able to piece it together from the limited number of sources available to me. The Italian SS volunteers were good and decent soldiers and deserve to be remembered as such!

Italian Waffen-SS men also served in other SS formations, first and foremost of which would probably be the 24th SS Mountain Division "Karstjaeger." This was another unit that never fully reached its designated status but nonetheless was an effective combat force that has largely been overlooked. Since it operated chiefly in Italy with many Italian volunteers in its ranks, the story of the SS "Karstjaeger" Brigade/Division is also fittingly included in this work.

Richard Landwehr

Establishment of the Italian Legion and Volunter Brigade

After the capitulation of Italy on 8 September 1943 and the disarming of the Italian military forces in German-held territory, the need to construct a new and reliable pro-Axis Italian auxiliary armed force became apparent. Fully 800,000 Italian soldiers had been disarmed by the Germans with more than 250,000 of these interned. This was the logical place to start looking for recruits as there were still a good many Fascist, pro-German men among the remnants of the defunct Italian Army.

Full-scale recruiting got underway after SS-Sturmbannführer Otto Skorzeny's spectacular rescue of Mussolini on 12 September 1943. The true Italian Fascists now had the Duce to rally around again. In the course of September 1943 some 15,000 Italian officers and men volunteered for service in the Waffen-SS and were sent to the German troop training grounds at Muensingen. Here they were referred to as "Legionaires of the Italian Volunteer Formations" and as "Legionaires of the Armed Militia."

Later in September and October 1943, Hitler and Mussolini worked out a plan for the formation of Italian militia units under the supervision of the Waffen-SS and as time passed the status of the Italian volunteers was clarified. The initial stages of the formation process concentrated on the construction of independent militia battalions. In November 1943, with the arrival of a new, large contingent of Italian troops at Muensingen it was decided to start building larger units that could serve as the nucleus for a new Italian Republican Army. Many of the volunteers who had earlier been slated for Waffen-SS service were

now withdrawn from that organization and assigned to the new Italian Army. Still, several thousand Italians remained at the disposal of the Waffen-SS and within a few weeks the first Italian SS units (composed of veteran soldiers) had completed training and formation and were being shipped back to Italy to help deal with the growing partisan menace.

Designated the SS Legion "Italia," the initial Italian SS infantry and artillery battalions were sent to the area around Turin in northern Italy. In addition a mixed anti-tank group went to Lecco on Lake Como while an officer training battalion was established at Ferrara with another small officer training unit being placed at Cremonese.

The Legion Headquarters Commando, known as the "Formation Staff Hansen" after the Legion CO, SS-Brigadeführer Peter Hansen, was stationed in Pinerolo, from where it was to supervise the disposition of the assorted Italian SS units. Almost immediately altercations erupted between members of the officers training battalion in Ferrara and the local inhabitants, with the result being that the civil authorities requested that the unit be posted elsewhere. Within a month it was shipped out for advanced weapons training and another commander was named.



Cover of political manual prepared for the Italian Waffen-SS.



Waffen-Ostufaf. Carlo Federico Degli Oddi, commander II./WGR 81 ("Vendetta" Bn.) and, eventually, WGRgt.81/29.SS Division.



Various Waffen-SS recruiting posters and leaflets.



In the Piedmont region, Italian SS militia troops were deployed in the Cuneo Valley where leaderless former soldiers of the 4th Royal Italian Army were being organized by communist agitators into partisan bands. They were armed with abandoned weapons and used to man fortified rebel areas around Turin. By late October 1943 these groups were well established in the so-called "Vinadio Fortress."

The Italian SS Legion was directed in its first actions

against the "Vinadio Fortress" by SS-Standartenfuhrer Gustav Lombard, who had temporarily replaced Brigfhr. Hansen, who was off duty due to illness. Lombard remained the Legion CO until Hansen's return in December 1943. During this time the Italian Waffen-SS operated under the general orders of Generaloberst von Mackensen, who had been placed in charge of the construction of the new Italian Army or "Milizia Armata" as it was called.

Brigfhr. Hansen's first priority after coming back on

duty was to begin the task of incorporating the quasi-independent Legion elements into a cohesive, larger unit. As a result the 1st Italian SS Volunteer Brigade was officially established on 1 February 1944. The intention was to make a frontline combat unit out of the brigade and many of them were dispatched back to Germany for advanced combat and specialist training. Hansen would command the brigade throughout most of its history up to the first part of its transformation into the 29th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Italy Nr. 1). Late in the war his successor would be the SS-Standartenfuehrer Konstantin von Heldmann. Up until its conversion into a division the brigade bore the following titles:

1st Italian SS Volunteer Brigade

1st Italian Volunteer Assault Brigade of the Milizia Armata

1st Assault Brigade of the Italian (SS) Volunteer Legion

The above designations were utilized from February through June 1944. In July 1944 the unit became the 9th Waffen-Grenadier Brigade der SS (Italian Nr. 1), a title which would remain in effect until April 1945 when the divisional designation took over.



**SS-Brigadefuehrer
PETER HANSEN**

Peter Hansen was born on 30 November 1896 in Santiago, Chile, the son of the director of a Chilean munitions factory. After the death of his father in 1903, his mother relocated the family to Silesia, their ancestral homeland. Peter attended schools in Bunzlau, Silesia and Dresden, completing his secondary education in 1914.

On 1 September 1914 he enlisted in the Royal Saxony Artillery Rgt. 48 and served with this unit throughout WWI. He became a Leutnant in 1916 and in the course of the war received numerous decorations for valor. After the end of hostilities, Hansen joined a "Free Corps" that operated against the communists in the Baltic area. He served as the chief-of-staff for the

supply office in the High Command of Border Guard "North" in Bartenstein before being assigned to the staff of Major von Fritsch, where he became the adjutant to the commanding quartermaster, Major Stroedel.

In 1922 he transferred into the 200,000 man Reichswehr, which was soon to be reduced in half, and spent the next 12 years on active duty with the rank of Oberleutnant (1st Lt.). In 1934 he was made a reserve officer and served with the rank of Hauptmann (Capt.) as the chief-of-staff for the Army Reserve Inspectorate in Weimar. He was returned to active duty in 1935 and became a battery commander in Naumberg, Leipzig and Meissen. He later became commander of the Heavy Artillery Detachment 50 as well as the senior garrison officer in Leipzig. In 1939 Hansen was promoted to Major.

On 1 June 1939, Peter Hansen was given the job of forming the artillery regiment of the SS-VT at Juterbog. On 10 August, the new SS Art.Rgt. was incorporated into the makeshift Panzer-division "Kempf" and participated in the Polish Campaign. Hansen led the regiment as part of the SS-"V" Div. in the Western Campaign of 1940 and continued to command it when it became part of the "Das Reich" Div. and fought in the Balkans and Russia in 1941. By this time, Hansen had permanently transferred into the Waffen-SS.

In the autumn of 1941, Hansen was made the inspector of artillery in the SS Main Office, but he was bothered by a lengthy illness. After recovering, he was appointed department chief of all Waffen-SS schools, a job he held until 1 March 1943 when he became the commander of the Latvian and Lithuanian volunteer legions. The "legions" were not cohesive commands, but were catch-all titles for all the troops of these nationalities serving with the German armed forces. Hansen's duties were again cut short by sickness and after a long hospital stay, Hansen was charged with the formation of an Army for Mussolini's Italian Social Republic. The development of this force took place at the Muensingen training grounds in Germany. Hansen also helped construct an Italian SS Legion, which he indeed commanded, and which later grew into a brigade and a division. In 1944 he was promoted to Brigadefuehrer and took charge of both the Italian Fascist Army in Northern Italy and the 9th SS Sturmbrigade "Italien."

Not long afterwards he was named the overall artillery commander in Lithuania and what remained of Latvia, a post he held until later in the year. In early 1945 he became the chief-of-staff of the XVIII. SS Army Corps led by Obergruppenfuehrer Georg Keppler which was part of Oberstgruppenfuehrer Paul Hausser's Army Group "G" on the southern part of the western front. The Corps was encircled on 22 April 1945 in the Schwarzwald, and it generally dissolved during a breakout attempt on 26 April. At that time, Brigfhr. Hansen was captured by French troops near the town of Saig.

Brigfhr. Peter Hansen, the "father" of the Waffen-SS artillery arm, died on 23 May 1967 after another protracted illness in his home at Viersen in the Rhineland.

Italian Waffen-SS Uniforms and Insignia

Since there was so much old Italian Army surplus to fall back on during the formation of the Italian SS Legion it was only natural that this would figure prominently in the uniforming and equipping of the unit. Regular Italian steel helmets with SS runic decals and/or the runic signs painted on them (often in a very large size), were standard issue to the Legion. The uniforms were mixtures of German and Italian military attire. In general most of the Italian SS men wore Italian green-gray tunics and trousers along with Italian camouflage smocks but with Waffen-SS issued combat and riding-style boots. Italian field caps and visored hats were worn initially but were gradually replaced by W-SS mountain caps and peaked hats.



Italian Waffen-SS officer's visored hat.



Collar patch of the 29.Waf.Gr.Div.d.SS (Italian Nr.1).



Variation on the divisional collar patch: red instead of black background.



Metal cap badge for the Italian SS, worn in place of the German eagle.



Divisional identification signs: 29. Waffen-Gr-Div-der-SS ITALIA (Italian Nr.1). Emblem - The Fascist Lictorian Bundle (i.e., split wood wrapped around an axe; the manner in which the ancient Roman Legionnaires carried their fire wood). Later on it became a symbol of authority and justice.



Italian Waffen-SS sleeve eagle. Silver or white cotton embroidery on a red wool background.

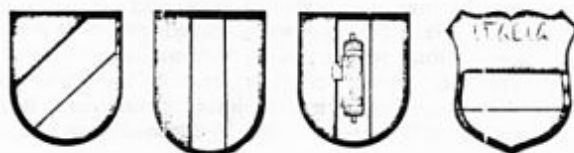
The distinct SS death's head was usually worn on all soft headgear of whatever manufacture, although the German national emblem (eagle and swastika) was omitted and at least in the case of the visored caps was replaced by a unique Italian SS emblem depicting an eagle grasping a "Fasces" or "Lictorian Bundle." In many instances metal SS death's heads were actually pinned to the front of camouflage helmet covers and during the early days of the Legion they sometimes appeared indiscriminately on different parts of Italian uniforms and hats (such as the feathered "Robin Hood"-type Alpini hat), just to signify that the wearer belonged to the Waffen-SS.

The Italian Waffen-SS used rank insignia of the standard SS pattern, but often with some radical design differences. The initial collar patches were red rather than black and some were in the shape of a much longer parallelogram than normal. The actual rank designation in the form of silver stripes and metal pips was repeated on both the right and left collar patches, unlike the German version where only the left collarpatch carried the rank badge.

At some point in time a red right collar patch bearing the "Fasces" emblem in silver may have been utilized as well as a right collar patch (again in red) that displayed the SS runes in silver. Prototype models for these insignia exist but their use is speculative. Two Italian Waffen-SS units were permitted to wear the standard SS runic collar patches in silver on black as a battle honor for their splendid performance during the fighting around the Anzio beachhead. They were the SS Fusillier (Recce) Battalion 29 "Debica" and the II. Bn./Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 81. By early 1945 most of the red collar



Official Waffen-SS sleeve armshield.



Variation armshields in the Italian national colors.

patches had been phased out for all Italian SS units and were supposedly replaced with black patches featuring a silver "Fasces" on the right one and the rank designation on the left one.

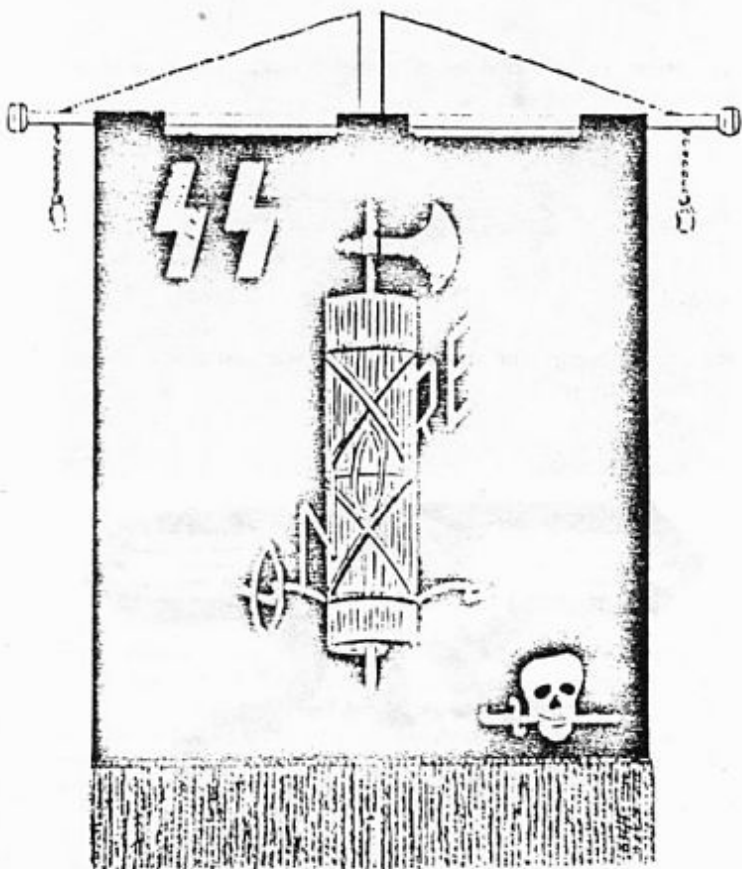
Numerous armshields in the Italian colors were designed, manufactured and issued, and used to some degree or another. From November 1943 until June 1944 a basic green-white-red tricolor armshield was worn on the left tunic sleeve. But at least four different varieties of this format existed, indicating that some were of local or private manufacture. The only significantly different one in this style displayed a "Fasces" on the white band in the tricolor.

The Waffen-SS designed and manufactured another armshield which did away with the Italian national colors altogether. This depicted a golden "Fasces," outlined in red thread on a black background which was in turn outlined in gold thread. This format may have appeared late in the war.

In place of the Waffen-SS sleeve "eagle," an Italian SS sleeve "eagle" was worn by most Italian SS men on their upper left tunic and/or camo smock sleeves. This showed an eagle grasping a horizontal "Fasces" in its claws. These were issued first with the design in silver thread on red cloth backing and later on with the design still in silver thread but on a black cloth backing. There were at least four different variations of the basic pattern.

All Italian W-SS units of battalion or regimental size had their own unique flags or banners. The regiments each had a full-sized standard, while the battalions or detachments frequently only carried a pennant. It is possible that the regiments may have had more than one design of flag. Some of the unit banners were based on the Italian tricolor while others featured motifs in the SS colors of silver and black. SS runes, death's heads and the Italian "Fasces" were usually featured in the designs.

Another distinguishing feature found on the unit banners, was the use of a sewn-on motto. Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 81 utilized the credo: "Resistere o Morire" (Resist or Die), while WGR der SS 82 had a one-word motto: "Vendetta" (Revenge). The banners used for the entire Legion, Brigade and Division featured the Italian SS



Banner adopted by Waffen-Grenadier Regiment 81 of the 29th SS Division.

slogan: "Per l'Onore e per la Vita" (My Honor is Loyalty), which was, of course, borrowed from the German SS.

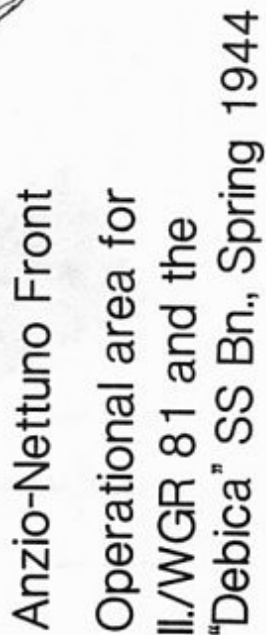
In his book Foreign Legions of the Third Reich, Vol. 2 (p. 244), David Littlejohn lists and illustrates a yoke and arrow, Spanish Falangist style collar patch that is said to have been made "for" the "1st Battalion of the 29th Division," which does not exactly clarify the situation. This may have been intended, therefore, as a battle honor for II./WGR 81, which actually was the first constituted combat battalion of the Italian SS Legion and was listed as such prior to its incorporation into a Waffen-Grenadier Regiment. On the other hand, I./WGR 81 was technically the "1st Battalion of the 29th Division," but it does not appear to have particularly warranted any special insignia distinction.



Collar patch said by David Littlejohn to have been utilized by the "First Battalion of the Division": presumably II./WGR 81.



Philatelic cover: Envelope addressed to a wounded member of the Italian Waffen-SS at the Marienbad reserve hospital.



Anzio-Nettuno Front
Operational area for
III./WGR 81 and the
"Debica" SS Bn., Spring

Italian Waffen-SS Units on the Anzio-Nettuno Front

In April 1944 the Italian SS Legion command provided two battalion-sized units for use against the "Allied"-held beachhead near Anzio. The first to arrive at the front was II. Bn./WGRdSS 81 (this battalion was known at the time as 1st Bn./Italian SS Legion, or the "Vendetta" Bn.) led by Waffen-Obersturmbannführer Degli Oddi; it was followed by the SS Fusilier Bn. 29 commanded by Waffen-Sturmbannführer Sassi. Both battalions quickly became heavily engaged.

In early May 1944 the entire Italian SS Legion received a favorable mention in the Wehrmacht War Communique for the demonstration of fighting spirit that its battalions displayed on the Anzio Front. Even though casualties were very high - out of 650 Italian SS Legionnaires at Anzio-Nettuno, 340 were killed - morale remained high. The II./WGR 81 fought as part of a battle-group that it formed along with German SS men from the 16th SS Panzergrenadier Div. "Reichsführer-SS" under the overall command of Ostufaf. Karl Diebitsch. Supported by some "Tiger" tanks and small batteries of mortars and anti-tank guns, the Italian volunteers from this battalion helped to contain part of the U.S. 3rd Inf. Div. (known as the "Kansas City" Div. to the Italians) for almost two months.

The Italian Fascist newspaper *Avanguardia* featured a colorful report on II./WGR 81's activities on the Anzio Front written by Waffen-Unterscharführer Niccolini soon after it was pulled from the lines. Among other things, Niccolini told the story of how ten of the Italian SS men managed to defend a 1250-foot front sector against vigorous U.S. opposition. He also described in detail the spirited resistance that the battalion put up and how it managed to win the admiration of the nearby German units. The II./WGR 81 helped to cover the general withdrawal from the Anzio Front and did a good job of it, never once faltering.

The achievements of the two Legion battalions were well recognized by Reichsführer-SS Himmler. On 3 May 1944 he issued the following proclamation:

Because of the demonstration of courage and sense of duty displayed by the volunteers of the Italian

SS, they [the Legion Battalions at Anzio] are designated as units of the Waffen-SS with all of the duties and rights that that implies."

In short, the RF-SS had lifted these Italian volunteers out of second-rate "Waffen-Grenadier" status and put them on an equal footing with the German Waffen-SS. On 15 June 1944 a decree was issued allowing the Italian soldiers who had served in the two Anzio battalions to wear the standard black and silver SS runic collar patches. The battle honors did not extend to the entire brigade, however, which remained a "Waffen-Grenadier" unit overall.

Of the surviving Italian Legionnaires that had served at Anzio, 22 were awarded a grade of the Iron Cross and 52 received promotions for their actions in the field. These were not empty or symbolic gestures; they were signs of real achievement. In June 1944, II./WGR 81 and SS Bn. "Debica" were reincorporated into the framework of the Italian SS Assault Brigade, although they would continue to see future action separate from most other units in the brigade. At this time the brigade was still in the Piedmont region of northwestern Italy, participating in occasional anti-partisan police actions and being recorded as part of the "armored defense group" reserve in the area.



Italian SS machine gunners from II./WGR 81 in action.



Italian SS assault troopers.

The SS Assault Brigade "Italia"

The bulk of the Italian SS Brigade had spent the first part of 1944 fighting communist terrorists in the Lanzo Valley. These actions were accorded laudatory articles in issues of *Avanguardia* for 6 May and 13 May 1944 in which the Italian SS men were highly praised for their actions in defense of the homeland and the British were condemned for helping to sponsor the partisans, thus setting "brother against brother" in a vicious civil war. At least in its brief period of existence up to that date, the Italian SS Legion had proved itself as a capable military formation, which was more than could be said for all too many units of the old Royal Armed Forces.

In July 1944, following the "Allied" landings in the south of France, the Italian SS Legion was reassembled in the Susa and Chisone Vallies to defend against any attempt to invade Italy from France. Units of the brigade then began to carry out security operations against the bandits and terrorists that infested the high mountains around the Germanasca Valley and Monte Orisiera. Some of the Italian SS volunteers also served alongside German Army troops on the "Westalpen Front" that guarded the northwest frontier.

The anti-partisan operations in difficult terrain demanded the highest amount of stamina and determination from the Italian SS troops, but once again they proved equal to the task. Frequently acting on information provided by captured partisans, which proved very helpful in the disposition of the brigade's heavy weapons, the Italian Waffen-SS troops were able to free one valley after another from the grasp of the terrorists. In the course of these actions air support was frequently provided by the Luftwaffe. From 4 August to 10 August 1944 an Italian SS battle-group operating in the "Fenestrelle Fortress" area achieved the brigade's greatest success to that date by completely cleansing the far northwest corner of partisans and driving their disorganized remnants out across the border into France.

On 7 September 1944 orders from the Reichsfuehrer-SS formalized the status of the Italian brigade as a formation

of the Waffen-SS, with the classification of 9th Waffen-Grenadier Brigade der SS. At this time most of the sub-units of the brigade, save the grenadier regiments, should have received the internal brigade ID number of 59 after their titles. This would have been in keeping with the Waffen-SS practice for numbering brigades by having all independent units within them add the number "50" to the brigade number. (Example: SS-Panzerjaeger Abteilung 59, SS-Pionier Kompanie 59, etc.). Whether or not this renumbering came about is open to question. Most of the Italian SS brigade and divisional sub-units have usually been identified with the divisional number "29", and this will be the case for the rest of this account.

The 7 September authorization for establishment of an Italian Waffen-SS Brigade was also the first step in its eventual transformation into a division. Had not the decree been issued the Italian volunteers may have found themselves serving merely as police auxiliaries for the remainder of the war. This is what happened to the members of a proposed Lithuanian Waffen-SS division.

While the Italian SS Brigade continued with its formation process, battle-groups had to be formed from its units to deal with the ever present communist terrorists. This effectively kept the brigade from achieving its necessary cohesiveness, but there was nothing that could be done about this situation. In the course of September 1944 a Kampfgruppe from the brigade was sent into action in the Lanzo Valley against the "Mauri" units of the so-called Italian Liberation Committee. Heavy losses in transport vehicles and supplies were suffered due to constant "Allied" aerial harassment, but operations continued into the latter part of the month.

In October, sizable contingents of Italian SS volunteers were involved in a large-scale police action around Valsassina. The objective was to encircle and destroy the partisan bands in the area. The brigade battle-group operated alongside a battalion from the National Republican (i.e., "Fascist") Guard Officer School and troops from the 11th National Republican Guard Brigade "Nera." In the



Anti-tank gunners from SS Panzerjaeger Abt.29.

ensuing heavy fighting the communist partisan "Brigades" "Poletti" and "Rosselli" were totally destroyed and the Valassina Valley was cleansed of terrorists.

An example of the difficulties of trying to keep the Italian SS units together long enough to form a complete whole can be found in the operational diary of the brigade's engineer company, which was almost in continuous action from the time it was first put together. The record of its deployments in 1944 is as follows:

1 April: Formed with eight officers, 3 NCOs and 72 men.

26 April: First combat engagement at Pagelato.

18 June to 18 July: Participates in fighting in the high valley of Russoleno-Susa.

30 July to 17 August: Engaged in the Germanasca Valley around Gross, Paset and Perrero.

26 August to 19 September: Combat action in the Lanzo Valley, around Losa, Viu, Lanzo, Coassolo, Cantolira and Chialamberto.

20 September to 11 October: More fighting in the Viu Valley at Viu and Fusine.

12 October to 7 November: Operations against terrorists in the Ossola Valley at Mergozzo, Candoglio, Albio, Villadossola, Varzo, Rivasco, Foppiano, Ghemme, Borgomanero and Romagnano.

10 November: Stationed at Vighizzolo di Cantu with a strength of six officers, 16 NCCs and 129 men.

In the late summer and early fall of 1944 the "home" garrisons of the Italian SS Brigade units were as follows:

HQ and Staff (under Brigfhr. Hansen) in Alzate Brianza.
Medical and Supply companies along with two transport columns in Erba.

Signals Company in Montorfano.

Engineer Company in Vighizzolo di Cantu.

Horse transport columns in Albate.

1st Regiment (Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. der SS 81), with HQ, staff and an officer training/replacement battalion, in Cantu.

2nd Regiment (WGR 82), with HQ and staff in Meda.

SS Fusilier (reconnaissance) Bn. 29 "Debica," in Mis-saglia.

SS Panzerjaeger Abteilung (anti-tank detachment) 29, along with 2nd Gruppe/SS Artillery Rgt. 29, in Canzo.

SS Artillery Regiment 29 with HQ, staff and 1st Gruppe, in Asso.

The Office of the Inspector of the Italian Waffen-SS (Waffen-Brigfhr. Mannelli) was in Valmadrera.



Wounded and disabled Italian SS veterans at the awards ceremony in Mariano Comense. Marshal Graziani is speaking. On the far right on the podium is Waffen-Brigade-

fuehrer der SS Pietro Mannelli, the Inspector of the Italian Waffen-SS. Third from right is SS-Ogruf. Karl Wolff.

The SS-Kampfgruppe "Binz"

During the retreat from the Anzio-Nettuno Front, an Italian SS battle-group was formed under the German SS-Obersturmbannführer Binz. It would remain active in one form or another, fighting independently of the main body of the brigade/division for the remainder of the war.

Initially, KGr. "Binz" consisted of the following elements:

- SS Fusilier Bn. 29 "Debica"
- II./WGR 81
- One artillery battery
- An anti-tank detachment of unspecified size
- An engineer platoon
- A supply-service platoon
- One truck transport column
- Strength: About 1,200 men all ranks.

The battle-group command post was first established at Piacenza, with the SS Fusilier Bn. 29 stationed in the Nuvole Valley and II./WGR 81 in the Trebbia Valley.

Attached to II./WGR 81 was a portion of the Army "Turkistan" Moslem 163rd Infantry Division, that was deployed in the same general area. For most of the next year this battalion had the job of keeping the Trebbia Valley road open and free from sabotage.

In April 1945, II./WGR 81 was involved in a series of bloody clashes with the communist terror bands around Bobbio and became separated from the battle-group command. Towards the end of the month the battalion retreated across the Garo River after having absorbed heavy losses to both the partisans and the "Allied" air forces.

On 30 April 1945, II./WGR 81 rejoined Kampfgruppe "Binz" at Piacenza and then crossed the Po River near Gorgonzola. It surrendered on the same day to forces of the U.S. Army. The other major element of the battle-group and perhaps the most outstanding single unit of the Italian Waffen-SS was the so-called "Debica" Battalion or SS Fusilier Bn. 29. Its history deserves a separate chapter of its own.



SS-Gruf. Debes, Marshall Graziani and SS-Ogruf. Wolff at the Mariano Comense troop inspection.

SS Fusilier Battalion "Debica"

The so-called Battalion "Debica" was the designated reconnaissance unit of the 29th SS Division, but for most of its history it served as the Italian SS Legion's vanguard strike-force. It would become the most battle-tested and reliable element in the Italian Waffen-SS.

The unit was formed in October 1943 from interned Italian soldiers at the Feldstetten POW camp. A Major Fortunata, who had served with the elite Bersaglieri in Russia from 1941 to 1942, was placed in charge of the formation of the battalion. Some 400 men volunteered for the battalion, a high percentage of them former Italian officers and NCOs, who were forced to accept lower ranks, since there were not enough positions available to accommodate their old grades. The battalion suffered its first setback in November 1943, when Maj. Fortunata and 38 other Italian volunteers resigned from the unit claiming real or imagined mistreatment from the Germans.

Notwithstanding the loss of its "leadership" the battalion was now shipped to the Muensingen troop training grounds for preliminary assembly. In early December 1943 it was transferred by rail to the Waffen-SS training facilities at Debica, near Koknowk in the Generalgouvernement (Poland), passing through Vienna and Prague enroute. For the next several weeks the unit underwent extensive combat training. At the end of February 1944 it was considered ready for action and was again shipped by rail back to Italy, arriving in Pinerolo in early March. Because of where it had trained, and the fact that it as yet had no formal title, the unit was referred to as the Battalion "Debica."

At Pinerolo, Bn. "Debica" was billeted at an "Alpini" mountain troop barracks and came under the direct control of the Italian SS Legion staff. Somewhat later in March the battalion was sent to Luserna San Giovanni with orders to prepare for action. On 21 March it went into



SS-Staf. Gustav Lombard (in vehicle), temporarily Brigade commander.

battle for the first time against communist terrorists near Rora and while performing stoutly, the battalion commander, Waffen-Hstuf. Daldosso fell badly wounded. In the days that followed Bn. "Debica" operated with other elements of the Italian SS against the partisans in the Gernasca Valley.

In the first part of April 1944, Bn. "Debica" was sent to Umbrien and quartered in Spoleto. From here it attacked partisan concentrations in the area around the Scheggia Pass. During platoon level operations conducted along the Via Cassia Highway the battalion reported the loss of more than 50 men.

Late in April 1944, SS Bn. "Debica" was ordered to the Anzio Front for what would really be a baptism of



Inspection of Italian SS troops by unidentified SS General.



Italian SS men from the "Vendetta" Battalion (later II./WGR 81), after being decorated with the Iron Cross, 2nd Class for their actions on the Anzio-Nettuno Front.

Late in April 1944, SS Bn. "Debica" was ordered to the Anzio Front for what would really be a baptism of fire. For the first time Italian SS men were placed in a frontline situation when the battalion took up positions running from Santa Marinella to Balò to Piumicino on the perimeter of the Anzio beachhead. American attacks all along this line were fiercely resisted and repulsed. The sector held by 1st Company/"Debica" was particularly hard pressed and saw the Italian Legionnaires engaged

at various times in violent, close-combat against U.S. tanks and armored vehicles. Despite this onslaught the company managed to hold its ground.

When the "Allies" finally broke out of their foothold at Anzio, SS Bn. "Debica" carried out a fighting retreat to Viterbo, where it was able, against great odds, to halt the main body of a U.S. armored strike force. It was a very creditable performance, made even more so due to the fact that the battalion had already lost



Italian SS Legion banners on display at Mariano Comense. Units represented, left to right: Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. 81 (first Legion Rgt.), II./WGR 81 "Vendetta" Bn., and

Waffen-Grenadier Rgt. 82 (at that time second Regiment in the Legion).



An awards ceremony at Mariano Comense in the fall of 1944. SS-Gruppenfuehrer Lothar Debes (center left) and SS-Obergruppenfuehrer Karl Wolff (center), decorate

Italian SS men. Debes was the Waffen-SS commander for Italy, while Wolff was the Higher SS and Police Leader for Italy.

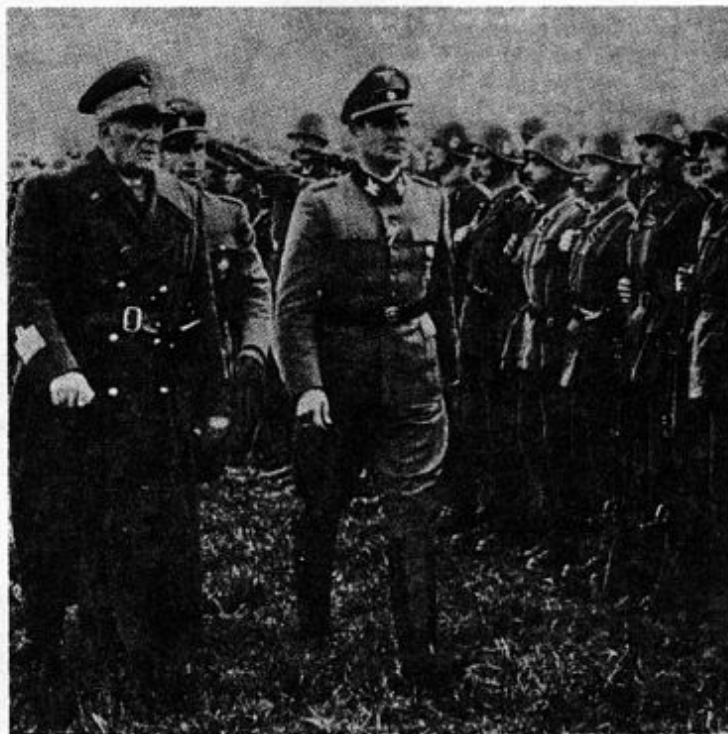
more than half of its original personnel. Reichsfuehrer-SS Himmler was so impressed by the unit's actions (in conjunction with those of II./WGR 81), that he saw to it that the Italian volunteers involved received equal treatment with German Waffen-SS men.

During the withdrawal to Florence, the battalion was converted into the recce detachment for the Italian SS Brigade by adding a mounted squadron with 100 horses and a bicycle company. After arriving in Florence the battalion was loaded on a transport train and sent to Porlimpopoli, which it reached on 25 June 1944. It was quartered here in an old cavalry barracks. After a few days of rest, 1st Company/"Debica" was sent out on a foot march to join other Italian and German troops in an anti-partisan action near Cumiane. Following the conclusion of this operation the battalion once again regrouped and by August 1944 was in Mariano Comense in the Lake Como region along with many other elements of the Italian SS Brigade.

Shortly thereafter the "Debica" Bn., now SS Fusilier Bn. 29 (or possibly 59 at this point in time), rejoined the Kampfgruppe "Binz" and was deployed for some time to come in the area surrounding Castelarquato. In March 1945 the frontlines once again caught up with the battalion, with 1st Company manning defensive positions in Montechino. But when the main blocking positions holding back the "Allied" advance gave way, the entire battalion was forced to fall back on Bettola. The 1st Company again soon found itself engaged in heavy, protracted fighting with partisans near Farini D'Olmo. Waffen-Oberscharfuehrer Peverelli's platoon from 1st Co. managed to root out a contingent of communist snipers from their fortified mountain strongholds in dangerous hand-to-hand combat. Peverelli's machine gunners then successfully defended the approaches to the Nure River bridge against all opposition.

In the middle of April 1945, 1st Co. rejoined the SS Fusilier Bn. 29 at Bettola. The unit was then engaged against the terrorists in the Nure Valley and 1st Company was once more detached and sent to Carpaneto Piacento.

Soon afterwards, some partisan bands emboldened by the advance of the "Allied" forces, managed to encircle Bettola, trapping most of SS Fusilier Bn. 29 in the town. For three days bitter fighting raged for possession of



The Italian Field Marshall Graziani and SS-Ogruf. Wolff inspect Italian SS troops back from the Anzio Front at Mariano Comense.



Italian SS troops in the field, wearing a variety of uniform components.



the community, but the deadlock was broken when the battalion counterattacked led by a German tank that was directed by Hstuf. Novek, the German liaison officer to the unit. Heavy casualties were inflicted on the Reds, but the battalion itself had taken no losses!

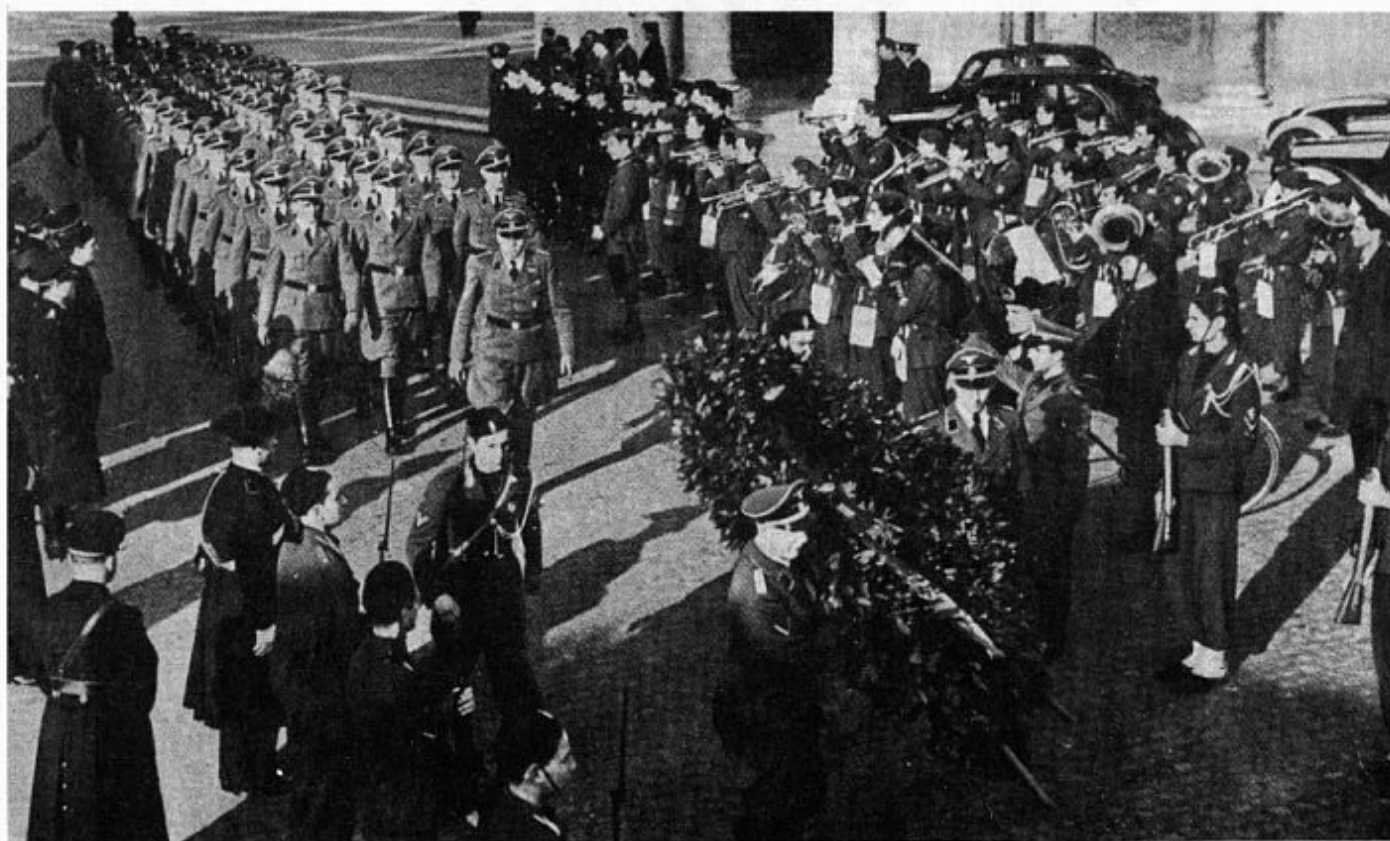
On 20 April, SS Fusilier Bn. 29 took up new positions at Nurebene, and dug in for a protected defensive effort. Within a few days the Italian SS men were faced by a strong, advancing American task force that had almost unlimited firepower at its disposal. The U.S. attack on the battalion's lines began on 25 April and for two days, savage, unrelenting combat raged throughout the rocky

hills. In the end the American "liberators" were driven off, badly bloodied by heavy losses. The men of SS Fusilier Bn. 29 then rounded up about a dozen prisoners from the battlefield and were then able to add another victory to their already formidable record of achievement.

But everyone knew what was coming next: a punishing aerial and ground bombardment in reprisal for the American failure and to try and soften up the Italian SS defenses. There was no sense in waiting around for this to happen, so the battalion pulled out of its positions during the night of 26/27 April and marched back to the ferry at Mortizza. Here the Italian SS men crossed



Italian Waffen-SS troops on the march through Northern Italy.



An interesting and never before published wartime press release photo of 50 SS officers placing a wreath on the monument to fallen Fascists in Rome on 10 March 1941.

The SS officers had been attending a course at a police academy in Rome.



Anzio front fighters on parade at Mariano Comense.



Marshal Graziani attaches a silver medallion to the flag of II./WGR 81, "Vendetta" Bn. on 23 November 1944 at Mariano Comense. The medal was an award to the

entire battalion for its performance on the Anzio-Nettuno Front.

the Po River to continue their withdrawal towards the north.

At this time some new information reached the battalion command post. It was learned that some 350 Italian Republican (Fascist) soldiers were being held prisoner by partisans at Santo Stefano Lodigiano. The battalion commander decided to undertake a rescue mission on his own initiative. Volunteers were called for and they were formed into assault parties led by some of the veteran NCOs. What transpired next was a real commando-style raid that completely surprised the communists. The partisan camp was overrun and the Republican soldiers liberated. Twelve heavy trucks and a good quantity of "booty" weapons and supplies were also seized.

Later on 27 April, the SS Fusilier Bn. 29 once again came in contact with partisans, this time at Somaglia. It proved to be a one-sided encounter with the terrorists put on the run by the tough Italian SS troops. But what couldn't be done on the ground was done from the air. A devastating Allied aerial assault from across the Po River - guided by the partisans - created havoc with Kampfgruppe "Binz." Heavy losses in men and material were taken. But after regrouping and taking care of the casualties, the battle-group continued its retreat to the north, passing through Lodi Vecchio and proceeding to Milan.

It was here that the end would come. A large American tank force began to envelop Kampfgruppe "Binz" from three directions, and there was effectively no longer any place to retreat to. Ostubaf. Binz summoned together his Italian officers for one last command conference. After a lengthy discussion the conclusion was reached that any further resistance to the enemy would only result in a useless bloodbath. So on 30 April 1945, SS Fusilier Bn. 29 "Debica," II./WGR 81 "Vendetta," and other Italian SS elements assigned to KGr. "Binz" sur-

rendered to the U.S. Army near Gorgonzola, after having put up a brave, sacrificial resistance over the previous days.

The rest of the 29th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Italian Nr. 1) was still deployed throughout the Lake Como region, and it too was caught up in a whirlpool of murderous, desperate fighting during the last days of the war. The men of SS Engineer Company 29 fought the communist partisans until they ran out of ammunition. They then capitulated and were massacred to a man! Around Mariano Comense, other newly formed battalions of the Italian Waffen-Grenadier Regiments likewise fought it out to the bitter end. Their first and last battle-field actions ironically came during the final days of the war.

The hatred that the communist guerrillas felt for the Italian SS men was literally insatiable. The Italian SS officers who surrendered or were otherwise caught were invariably taken before a "People's Court" (a tribunal composed of sadistic, Marxist terrorists!), pronounced guilty of "war crimes," and summarily executed. The officers who had been hospitalized due to wounds fared no better. For instance, Waffen-Obersturmfuehrer Luigi Ippoliti was hauled out of a military hospital at Cantu on a streetcar, "judged" and executed. Strangely enough, the "Allied" Powers who were supposed to be on a holy crusade to eliminate tyranny, saw nothing wrong with the brutal activities of the "People's Courts," which were actually touted as "democratic" institutions!

In Canzo and Asso portions of the SS Artillery Rgt. 29 surrendered to the so-called "Committee for National Liberation" after having served with distinction in the Waffen-SS. The members of these units were never seen again. In fact, the great majority of the members of the Italian Waffen-SS would be barbarically slain in captivity with the nonchalant sanction of the "liberating"



The surrender of Waffen-SS troops to the Americans in Milan, May 1945.

"Allies." War crimes, of course, were only committed by the losers!

In conclusion it can be said that the 20,000 volunteers of the Italian SS Legion and the 29th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS, did their job well, whether fighting internal terrorists or greatly superior regular enemy forces. In the battle for their homeland and against the international

communists, the Italian members of the Waffen-SS proved themselves soldiers of exceptional motivation and quality. They were one of the few bright spots in the Italian contribution to the Axis war effort. The shameful and barbaric end to which most of these brave soldiers came must forever be considered another black mark on the stained escutcheon of the "Allied" victors.

Order of Battle of the 29th Waffen-Grenadier Division der SS (Italian Nr. 1) with Field Post Numbers

COMMANDERS

SS-Brigadefuehrer Peter Hansen (1943)
SS-Standartenfuehrer Gustav Lombard (temporary) (1943)
SS-Brigadefuehrer Peter Hansen (1944)
SS-Standartenfuehrer Konstantin von Heldmann (1945)

DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS [82 640]

Staff Officers

Orderly Officer: Ostuf. Schinke
Ia (chief-of-staff): Stubaf. Georg Buchholz
Ic (intelligence): Ostuf. Pfeffer
Id (training or transport): Hstuf. Wolfart
IVb (medical): Waf.-Stubaf. Dr. Criccio
Maintenance Group: Hstuf. Pfaff, Ostuf. Nischwitz [56 754]
Medical Company: [66 606]
Motor Vehicle Park:
Ist and 2nd Transport Companies
Translator Squad: Waf.Ostuf. Tommasini
Propaganda Company: Waf.Ostuf. Giuseppe Gobello

Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 81

Commander: Waf.Ostuf. Degli Oddi
Adjutant: Waf.Hstuf. Franceschini
Staff [87 670]
Staff Company [87 670 A]
I. Battalion [83 851 or 83 851 A]
Commanders: Waf.-Hstuf. Novena, later Waf.-Hstuf. Ragona
Ist through 5th Companies: [83 851 B through F]
Ist Company CO: Waf.-Hstuf. Ragona
5th Company CO: Waf.-Hstuf. Fischetti
II. Battalion [81 304 or 83 304 A]
(Original 1st Bn. of the Italian SS Legion.)
Commander: Waf.Ostuf. Degli Oddi

Medical Officers: Waf.Ustuf. Dr. Gian Lesmo, Waf.-Ostuf. Dr. Fulvio Bracco
6th Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Remo Buldrini [81 304 B]
7th Company [81 304 C]
8th Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Guglielmo Brown, Waf.-Hstuf. Fischetti, Waf.-Ostuf. Pappo
9th Company [81 304 E]
10th Company [81 304 F]

Waffen-Grenadier Regiment der SS 82

Commander: Waf.Staf. Celebrano
Staff [86 922 or 86 922 A]
I. Battalion [81 984 or 81 984 A]
Ist Company: Waf.-Ostuf. Aldobrandino Allodi [81 984 B]
2nd through 5th Companies [81 984 C through F]
2nd Company CO: Waf.-Hstuf. Giuseppe Etter
II. Battalion [83 761 or 83 761 A]
6th through 10th Companies [83 761 B through F]
III. Battalion [82 354 or 82 354 A]
11th through 15th Companies [82 354 B through F]

Italian Waffen-SS Officer Training Battalion

Commanders: Waf.-Staf. Alberto Bianco Cristo until December 1944, then Waf.-Ostuf. Tiberio Bedotti
Adjutant: Waf.-Hstuf. Felice Fontana
Medical Officer: Waf.-Ustuf. Dr. Avastano
Translator: Waf.Ostuf. Vitagliano

SS Artillery Regiment 29

Commander: Waf.-Stubaf. Carlo Pace
Staff [80 203 or 80 203 A]
Adjutant: Waf.-Hstuf. Galbiati
IIIa: Waf.-Hstuf. Ruggeri
I. Detachment [81 568 or 81 568 A]
Commander: Waf.-Hstuf. Bini
Ist Battery: Waf.-Ostuf. Brunetti [81 568 B]

2nd and 3rd Batteries [81 568 C and D]

II. Detachment [80 465 or 80 465 A]

Commander: Waf.-Hstuf. Dallara

4th Battery: Waf.-Ostuf. Malimperi [80 465 B]

5th and 6th Batteries [80 465 C and D]

SS Anti-tank Detachment (Panzerjaegerabteilung) 29
[87 772 or 87 772 A]

Commander: Waf.-Stubaf. Pietro Martinelli

Ordnance Officer: Ostuf. Huene von Hoiningen

Adjutant: Waf.-Ostuf. Adriano Serra

IIIa: Waf.-Hstuf. Bertola

IVa: Waf.-Hstuf. Pleroni

1st Battery (20 mm): Waf.-Ostuf. Grassetto, Waf.-Ostuf. Grassellini [87 772 B]

2nd Battery (47/32): Waf.-Ostuf. Luigi Balzaretti [87 772 C]

3rd Battery (75/18): Waf.-Hstuf. Bortolato [87 772 D]

4th Battery (75/42): Waf.-Ostuf. Martelli [87 772 E]

5th Battery (75/48): Waf.-Ostuf. Perona [87 772 F]

SS Fusilier Battalion 29 "Debica"

Staff [57 239 or 57 239 A]

Commanders: Waf.-Stubaf. Sassi, Waf.-Hstuf. Daldosso,
Waf.-Hstuf. Cantarella

Adjutant: Waf.-Hstuf. Cantarella

Weapons Officer: Waf.-Hstuf. Franceschini

Supply Officer: Waf.-Hstuf. Franceschini

Staff Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Cantarella [57 239 A]

Adjutant: Waf.-Ustuf. Sassi

1st Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Signorini, Waf.-Ustuf. Bottini,
Waf.-Ustuf. Passera [57 239 B]

2nd Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Daldosso [57 239 C]

3rd Company [57 239 D]

4th Company: Waf.-Hstuf. Ferrarese [57 239 E]

SS Engineer Company 29 [59 436]

Commander: Hstuf. Rolf Lochmueller

Additional Italian Officers: Waf.-Ostuf. Piero Raglianti,

Waf.-Ostuf. Gerardo Rosati, Waf.-Ostuf. Modesto

Carile, Waf.-Ustuf. Roberto Tortella, Waf.-Ustuf.

Domenico Pone

SS Signals Company 29 [58 260]

SS-Obersturmfuehrer Heydemann

SS Field Replacement Battalion 29 [85 373 or 85 373 A]

1st through 5th Companies [85 373 B through F]

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32 383

GRANDI, Heinrich

SS-Gren., 1919

Herdecke

Stab 29. SS-Gren.-

Div. „Italien“

June 1944 Italien

SS-Grenadier Heinrich Grandi. MIA from the divisional staff in June 1944.

Italian/Waffen-SS Ranks

Allievo Sottufficiale (Unterfuehrer-Anwaerter; NCO candidate)

Caporale (Sturmann)

Caporale Maggiore (Rottenfuehrer)

Sergente (Unterscharfuehrer)

Sergente Maggiore (Scharfuehrer)

Maresciallo Ordinario (Oberscharfuehrer)

Maresciallo Capo (Hauptscharfuehrer)

Maresciallo Maggiore (Sturmscharfuehrer)

Sottotenente (Untersturmfuehrer)

Tenente (Obersturmfuehrer)

Capitano (Hauptsturmfuehrer)

Maggiore (Sturmbannfuehrer)

Tenente Colonnello (Obersturmbannfuehrer)

Colonnello (Standartenfuehrer)

Song of the Italian Waffen-SS

"Battaglioni 'M'" (The Death Battalion)

Battalions of the Duce
Battalions of death, created for life;
In spring the cycle begins anew,
The continents are aflame with blooming flowers;
To conquer there must be the Lions of Mussolini armed
with valor.

[Refrain]

Battalions of Death,
Battalions of Life.
The match begins again.
Without hatred there can be no love.
Red "M" [death] - fate makes it all the same;
Black wreaths for the Squadrista,
With two grenades in hand and a flower in our mouth!

Against gold there is blood and it makes history,
Against ghettos, gardens bloom.

Over the world beats the heart of Mussolini;
At Marizai the good seed sprouted.
In the climate of battle and victory,
The black flame burst forth in October.

Against Judah, against gold,
Blood shall make history;
We shall give you victory
Duce or our last breath!

Battalions of Death,
Battalions of Faith,
He shall ever triumph he who believes the most.
He who can suffer the longest.

The above translation is intended to give the feel and spirit of the song and not, of course, the proper cadence. In Italian with the proper music, it is quite beautiful.

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Addendum

Additional German Officers with the 29th SS Division

SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer Dr. Kroehle (IVc), Veterinary Officer
SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer Dr. Neumann (IIIa), Judge Advocate (legal services)
SS-Obersturmfuehrer Helno von Broesicke, Orderly Officer on the Divisional Staff
SS-Obersturmfuehrer Nischwitz, commander, 1st Motorized Transport Column
SS-Obersturmfuehrer Scharff, adjutant of SS-Kampfgruppe "Binz"
SS-Untersturmfuehrer Dr. Hoffmann, dental officer, I./WGR 82

The inspector of the Italian Waffen-SS was Waffen-Brigadefuehrer und Generalmajor der SS Pietro Mannelli.

An unknown number of Italian SS volunteers were supposed to have served with the 17.SS Panzergrenadier Div. "Goetz von Berlichingen," and up to 2,000 Italian SS men were said to have been on duty in Hungary in 1945. (Information from An deutscher Seite, p.191.) Those in Hungary may have served with 18.SS Panzergrenadier Div. "Horst Wessel." However, no hard information exists to support the above contentions.

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The 24.Waffen-Gebirgs-(Karstjaeger)-Division der SS

The 24th SS Mountain Division "Karstjaeger" never actually developed into a full-scale division but nonetheless remained a highly efficient combat unit throughout its existence. It contained a mixed bag of personnel, dominated by a largely Austrian officer and NCO corps. Ethnic-Germans from the South Tyrol constituted the main manpower element but they were supplemented by pro-Fascist ethnic Italians along with Slovenes, Croats and possibly some Serbs as well. This unit operated almost exclusively in the northeastern part of Italy along the northern Adriatic seacoast and in the interior mountains.

The "Karstjaeger" Division had its origins in 1942, when on the orders of Reichsfuehrer-SS Himmler, a designated SS-Karstwehr Company was established at the Dachau SS Training Camp effective 10 July 1942. The Company consisted initially of only two platoons, and it was designed to serve in the peculiar Karst country along the northern Adriatic coast against developing Red terrorist groups. The Karst region was noted for its rugged limestone rock formations, deep crevices and sinkholes, and fertile valleys. The RF-SS had decided that a "specialist" rough terrain unit like the SS-Karstwehr Company, was a necessity in conducting security operations in that unique territory.

On 15 November 1942, the Waffen-SS HQ in Berlin authorized the expansion of the SS-Karstwehr Company into a full battalion; this activity still taking place at the Dachau SS barracks. The new Battalion was placed under the jurisdiction of the SS Panzer Command Staff (forerunner to the first SS Panzer Corps' staff), in Pottenstein. By the summer of 1943 the SS-Karstwehr Battalion had been fully formed and it was then sent to Arnoldstein

in the Carinthian region of Austria for field training.

By July 1943, the unit was considered combat ready and when the pro-German Italian government was overthrown on 25 July 1943, the SS-Karstwehr Bn. was immediately sent across the border into Italy. Its first combat assignment was to capture and disarm the strong Italian garrison at Tarvisio, and this was accomplished after a brisk fire-fight. The Battalion then marched through, occupied and secured the Kanai Valley.

Following its initial successes, the SS-Karstwehr Bn. was looked upon as a dependable "fire brigade," and was used wherever it was needed in the northeastern Italian provinces of Trieste, Udine-Friul and Gorizia. The foe for the most part consisted of the increasingly bold, "Allied"-backed Marxist bandit groups that roamed the Karst region, spreading terror and murder wherever they went. The SS-Karstwehr troops were quickly caught up in small-scale but very bloody little actions against these "partisans," and they would now be continuously engaged throughout the remainder of the war.

In the autumn of 1943, the SS-Karstwehr Bn. staff headquarters was situated in the town of Gradisca. The next major development in the history of the unit came on 18 July 1944 when the RF-SS and the Waffen-SS HQ authorized the expansion of the roughly 1,000 man battalion into a 6,600 man division. Supervising the process was the responsibility of the Higher SS and Police Leader for the "Adriatic Coastland," who at that time was SS-Gruppenfuehrer and Lt.Gen. of the Police, Odilo Globocnik.

Later in the summer of 1944 the new divisional staff for the proposed SS "Karstjaeger" Division was established at Moggio in the Italian province of Udine-Friul. Selected to be divisional commander was SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer Carl Marks (also spelled Karl Marks and Karl Marx in some sources). The first divisional supply officer was SS-Hauptsturmfuehrer Herbert Engel.

With the addition of local volunteers as well as new contingents of Reich Germans and Austrians, it proved possible to fully form one mountain regiment (SS-Gebirgsjaeger Rgt. 59), and part of an artillery regiment (SS-



Identification sign of 24.SS-Frw-Gebirgs-Div KARST-JAEGER. Emblem - The center was based on the "Tyrol-Run" with arrowheads on both sides of the shaft. The point of the design (top part) was taken from the old "Tyrol Kaiserjaeger" feather-tuft emblem. The Division was composed of ethnic German mountain militia men from the South Tyrol (that had been annexed from the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire by the Italians).



Proposed 24.SS-Karstjaeger Div. collar patch. Said to have been manufactured at Dachau but never issued.

Gebirgs-Artillerie Rgt. 24). Work also began on the construction of a second mountain regiment (SS-Gebirgsjaeger Rgt. 60). The fact that many, if not most, of the new volunteers for the Division were not of German extraction, led to the classification of the formation as a Waffen-Gebirgs-Division der SS; the "Waffen" in the title indicating non-Germanic origins of much of the personnel.

After several months of attempting to expand while absorbing heavy losses in brutal anti-partisan warfare, the effort to constitute the "Karstjaeger" formation as a full-scale SS division was abandoned. Ostufaf. Marks left to take charge of the massive Ukrainian SS Training and Replacement Rgt. 14 of the 14th Ukrainian SS Division. He would lead that command until the end of the war, ending up with the rank of SS-Standartenfuehrer.

On 5 December 1944, the RF-SS ordered the "Karstjaeger" Division to be reorganized as a Mountain Brigade. As a result the internal regimental structure was junked, with the twin regiments being converted into battalions instead. Since the unit operated most of the time with small, combined unit battle-groups, the overall structure was fairly meaningless anyway but was made much more realistic by the orders to realign downwards in size.

Because of its constant combat deployment and resultant high losses, the "Karstjaeger" Brigade could only effectively field and maintain a fighting strength of around 2,000 troops. In April 1945, the Brigade was thrown into action for the first time against British strike forces advancing from the south. It immediately distinguished itself in hard defensive fighting in the frontlines. During a period of temporary stability, parts of the Brigade were sent into the Carinthian and Julian Alps to again do battle with Red terrorists. Additionally, the Brigade's reserve and training company was rushed to the defense of Vienna where it directly engaged the Soviet Red Army. Its ultimate fate is unknown.

At the end of April 1945, the remnants of the SS "Karstjaeger" Brigade were combined with replacement troops from 7th SS Mountain Division "Prinz Eugen" and officer cadets from the SS-Junkerschule "Klangenfurt" in Austria into a battle-group under the command of the famous

SS-Sturmabfuhrer WERNER HAHN

Werner Hahn was born in October 1901. On 17 January 1919 he joined the 1st Rgt. "von Brandis" in Neureupping. This unit fought as a "Free Corps" against the Bolsheviks around Riga in Latvia and in Northern Lithuania. At the conclusion of the fighting in the Baltic area, Hahn was called up to serve in the new 100,000 man German Reichswehr.

He was assigned to a mountain unit and he soon developed a life-long attachment for the high country. In February 1943, Werner Hahn transferred into the Waffen-SS to serve as an instructor at the W-SS High Mountain School at Neustift in Tyrol. On 18 April 1943 he was appointed commander of the SS Gebirgsjaeger Training and Replacement Bn. in Hallein. On 9 November 1943 he received the SS rank of Sturmabfuhrer in place of his Army rank of Major.

In 1944, Stubaf. Hahn was made commander of the SS-Karstjaeger Rgt. which was formed around Salzburg and deployed for action in northern Italy. He led this unit with distinction throughout most of its brief incarnation as the 24th SS Mountain Div. and as the "Karstjaeger" Brigade. Werner Hahn died on 12 July 1982 at the age of 80.



SS mountain troop officer.

SS-Brigadefuehrer Heinz Harmel. Harmel had just lost his previous command, 10th SS Panzer Division "Frundsberg," for having engineered a breakout from a Soviet encirclement against higher orders near Spremberg.

SS-Kampfgruppe "Harmel," including the "Karstjaeger" troopers, came under the control of the XXII. Mountain Corps led by Gen. Lanz. The mission for the battle-group was to hold open the Karawanken Mountain passes and the river crossings to the south of Klagenfurt and Villach, so that retreating soldiers from Yugoslavia and Italy could get through. Following the premature surrender of the main part of the German armed forces in Italy on 29 April 1945, other units along the critical Udine-Villach road began to follow suit on 1 May 1945, surrendering to the British 6th Armored Division, rather than to the Red partisans.

Brigfhr. Harmel considered this a dangerous turn of events, since if everyone capitulated, many thousands of German soldiers would have been unnecessarily lost to Tito's savage followers. Thus he ordered his battle-group to dig in in the strategic mountain passes south of Villach. There his troops fought off numerous British probing attacks. A last ditch defensive effort was conducted on 7 May, allowing still more troops to escape from the Balkans, then on 8 May, SS-KGr. "Harmel" and the SS "Karstjaeger" Brigade pulled back into Carinthia and began surrendering to British Army units in the Rosen Valley near Villach. The SS "Karstjaeger" Brigade had comprised the last rearguard of the task force, and most of its elements did not surrender until 9 May 1945. Its soldiers had carried out their duties to the very limit. The 24th SS "Karstjaeger," in whatever form it took, had proven to be a stalwart and vallant formation of the international Waffen-SS!

Divisional Titles

10 July 1942

SS-Karstwehr Company

15 November 1942

SS-Karstwehr Battalion

18 July 1942

Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjaeger) Division der SS
and later

24. Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjaeger) Division der SS

5 December 1944

Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjaeger) Brigade der SS

Structure and Field Post Numbers of

24. Waffen-Gebirgs (Karstjaeger) Division der SS

Staff

Staff Company [57 542]

SS-Gebirgsjaeger Rgt. 59 [40 731]

I. Bn./SS-Geb. Rgt. 59 [05 219]

II. Bn./SS-Geb. Rgt. 59 [28 657]

III. Bn./SS-Geb. Rgt. 59 [33 627]

SS-Gebirgsjaeger Rgt. 60 (never fully formed)

SS-Gebirgs-Artillerie Rgt. 24 [22 224]

SS-Gebirgs-Nachrichten (Signals) Abteilung 24 (one
company in strength) [34 445]

Structure and Field Post Numbers of

the Reformed SS "Karstjaeger" Brigade

Brigade Staff [40 731]

Staff Company [57 542]

I. Battalion (1st-4th Companies) [05 219]

II. Battalion (5th-8th Companies) [28 657]

Armored Assault Company (formed from the former
Jaeger Company) [64 584]

Mountain Artillery Battery (formed from the nucleus
of the intended SS-Geb. Art. Rgt. 24) [22 224]



SS mountain trooper in the "Karst" country.

SS-Karstwehr/Karstjaeger Commanders

July 1942 to 1944

SS-Standartenfuehrer Dr. Ing. Hans Brand

1944

SS-Sturmbannfuehrer Berschneider

then

SS-Sturmbannfuehrer Werner Hahn

Also,

SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer Carl Marks was designated
the first divisional commander, but whether or not
he ever assumed command is open to question.

April 1945

SS-Obersturmbannfuehrer Wagner

"Karstjaeger" Unit Strengths

31 December 1943

(as the SS-Karstwehr Bn.)

8 officers / 117 NCOs / 821 men

Total: 946 all ranks

30 June 1944

(as the SS-Karstwehr Bn.)

12 officers / 132 NCOs / 813 men

Total: 957 troops

30 June 1944

(formation group for the 24. Waf. Geb. [KJ] Div. d. SS)

12 officers / 132 NCOs / 730 men

Total: 874 all ranks

20 September 1944

(as the 24. Waf. Geb. [Karstjaeger] Div. d. SS)

27 officers / 163 NCOs / 1,799 men

Total: 1,989 all ranks

Proposed but never attained divisional strength

165 officers / 898 NCOs / 5,563 men

Total: 6,626 all ranks plus 1,058 auxiliaries



32 378

MÖLLER, Richard

SS-Gren., 1925

Bayern

1. Rgt. der 24. SS-

Div. „Karstjäger“

Febr. 1945 Lauen-

burg

Member of 1. Rgt./24. SS-Div. "Karstjaeger" missing-in-
action in February 1945.

Insignia

SS Runic collar patch with edelweiss specialist mountain troop cap and sleeve badges. Also attributed to the division and said to have been manufactured but never issued is a collar patch displaying a "Karst flower" which looks like a stemless edelweiss.

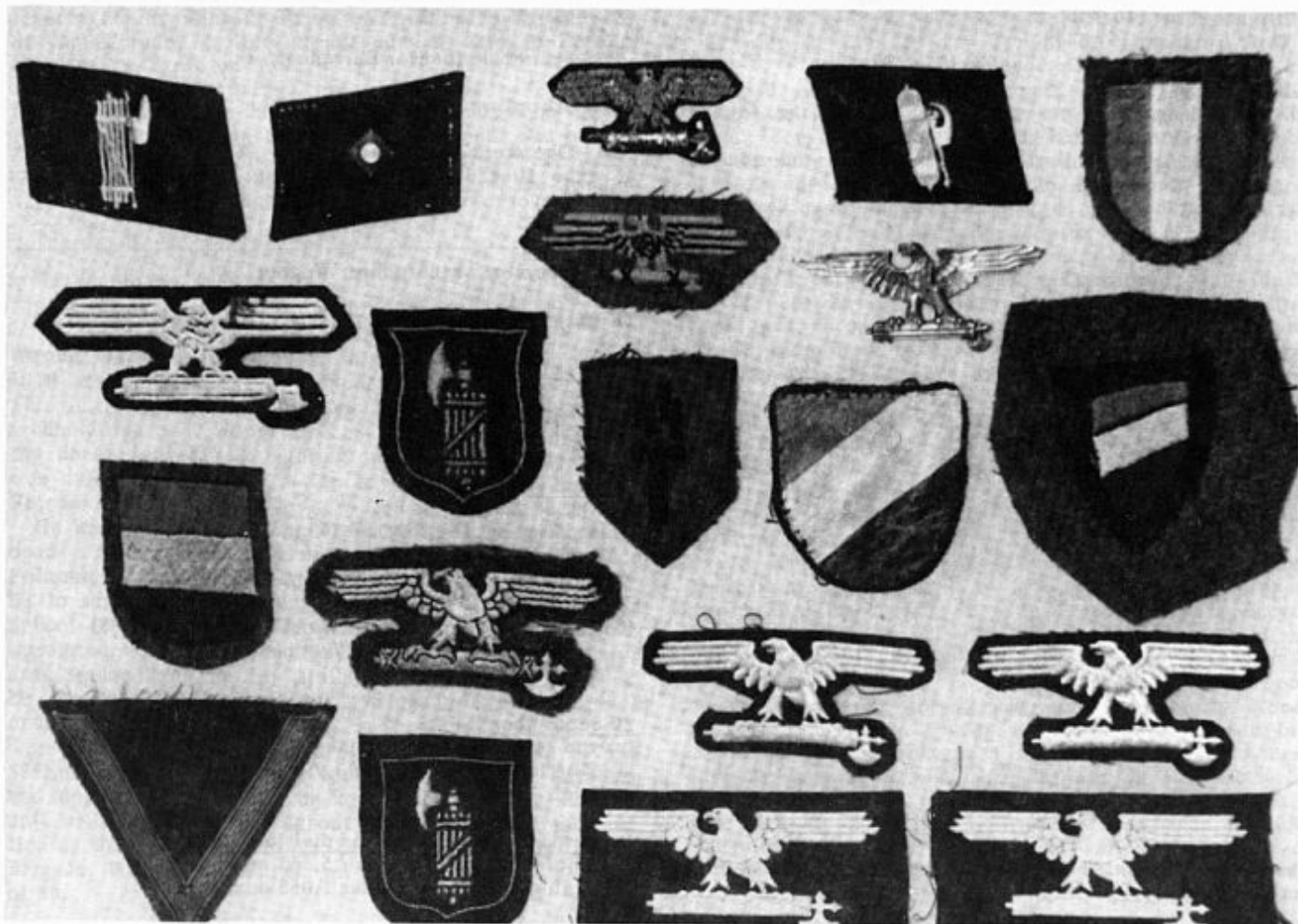
The divisional identification sign displayed the traditional Austrian "Tyrolean Kaiserjaeger" feather-tuft emblem on an arrow-pointed cross or Tyr Rune. An alternate vehicle identification sign said to be in use by "Karstjaeger" was a painting of an edelweiss on a stem.

Today the veterans of the "Karstwehr"/"Karstjaeger" formations keep the unit's past traditions alive in annual reunions in the Italian annexed South Tyrol. The emblem of the veteran's group is an edelweiss and/or "Karst flower."



Italian Waffen-SS tunic.

Variety of Italian Waffen-SS insignia.



THE WAFFEN-SS HIGH MOUNTAIN SCHOOL

The SS High Mountain School was established in Neustift in the Stubai Valley of Tyrol on 15 September 1942. It consisted of a staff and a training group which was divided into the following instruction categories: mountain officer command training, mountain-jaeger NCO training, mountain engineering, mountain communications, mountain medical services and mountain supply-transport training.

In April 1944 the school was expanded through the addition of another three training groups. II. Group was designated the SS Mountain Warfare School and it was established as a separate facility, with a reinforced training company, at Predazzo. III. Group was devoted to mountain marksmanship and sharpshooter training, while the IV. Group was organized into a mountain officer's training school. All of these segments were subordinated, however, to the main institution at Neustift.

Parts of the SS High Mountain School were mobilized for the first time in September 1943 for use in the disarming of Italian troops near the Reschen Pass and the towns of Mals, Schlanders and Meran. Later on, parts of the Neustift facility had to be deployed in the field again, this time to fight partisans in the area around the Tonale Pass, Sondrio and Lake Como. The SS Mountain Warfare School in Predazzo (which was situated in the Fleims Valley of South Tyrol), was likewise eventually sent into action, first fighting around the Rolle Pass. In 1945 the entire SS Mountain Warfare School was organized into a Kampfgruppe to defend against the "Allied" advance in the Salurn area. This task force eventually went into American captivity.

In April 1945, a major portion of the Neustift facility was commandeered by the Gauleiter for Tyrol and the instructors and trainees were formed into battlegroups that were deployed around Scharnitz and Seefeld. They eventually fell back on Neustift where they surrendered to American forces on 3 May 1945. The only commander of the SS High Mountain School and its branches was Standartenfuehrer Eberhard von Quirsfeld, who held this position from 15 September 1942 to May 1945. He died on 28 June 1983 at the age of 84.

A good many officers, NCOs and specialists from the SS Mountain Divisions "Nord," "Prinz Eugen," "Handschar," "Skanderbeg," "Kama" and "Karstjaeger," underwent a part of their training at the Waffen-SS High Mountain School.



Waffen-SS trooper at the SS High Mountain School.



On the march at the SS High Mountain School.



Mortar training at the SS High Mountain School.



Training exercise at the SS High Mountain School.